

## **PRUNING GOOSEBERRIES AND CURRANTS**

**Gooseberries and currants can put up with years of neglect, but with a bit of TLC you'll get a crop to keep your larder stocked well into winter.**

Gooseberries and currants will produce a wonderful crop, year after year, if pruned properly, but they will even survive despite decades of neglect. Conifer plantations have replaced sheep on so many Border hills in Scotland, and it's not at all uncommon when walking along forestry tracks to chance upon the remains of one of these old farming settlements. Peeking out over a pile of rubble or an ancient dyke at Jedhead or Piet's Nest, you'll see a spindly redcurrant or gooseberry. Plants can be as sure a sign of bygone habitation as lumps of stone.

There's an ancient redcurrant at the bottom of my own garden, and when, many years ago, our farm was absorbed into a neighbouring one, the house lay abandoned for a long time. The farmer's daughters used to come and pick the currants, often balancing precariously on a dyke and at the end of one such foray, the younger girl slipped and couped the whole basket, committing such a heinous crime that her elder, seventy years later, still berates poor Cathy for this folly.

There is, of course, just one problem about these near immortal members of the gooseberry family [Grossulariaceae]: the gooseberries are the size of currants while the currants are no bigger than peppercorns. So a wee bit work with the secateurs mightn't be the worst thing after all. Some experts recommend this pruning in the winter, but I have always done it in the early autumn when, in the case of redcurrants, you remember which branches haven't fruited well, and to give the cut stems a chance to heal before a harsh winter.

Pruning often helps next year's fruiting buds to form, increases yield by reducing stem and leaf growth, and opens the bush up to allow sunlight and good air circulation. Why air? Densely growing vegetation is the ideal breeding ground for fungal disorders. Many mildews thrive in this kind of damp, airless environment and crossing branches will throttle each other, while the constant rubbing induces cankers. So it's essential to let a plant, whatever it is, 'breathe' and this is the most important reason for pruning.

Currants and gooseberries are often grown as bushes, and you achieve good air circulation by leaving the centre of the bush open. Currants produce stems from the base and you select half a dozen strong ones to form a circle. When removing branches from a main stem, be sure to cut right back to it, taking away branches that grow straight downwards or vertically. You're aiming for an open, diagonal fan of upwardly pointing branches. You let gooseberries produce this pattern, having first encouraged the plant to grow a strong, central stem to about 20-30cm, any branches that then grow below that height must be removed.

The alternative to bushes is cordon or fan training, a technique used in many Victorian walled gardens and one worth copying when space is limited. If you have a small garden with a spare south-facing wall or fence, you've got the ideal spot, but they will tolerate partial shade and were often grown on north-facing walls in kitchen gardens. For all the fruits, run wires, horizontally along the wall and space the horizontals 30cm apart. Stems are tied either directly to the wires or trained along canes which are tied in at roughly 30°, 60°, 120° and 150° to form a fan. Another big advantage in growing fruit like this is that you can easily restrict growth when cutting back to fruiting spurs. This lets you accommodate the plant in the space you have and will provide you with larger fruit. A well trained bush looks great throughout the year and it does make fruit picking easy.

Red and white currants [*Ribes rubrum*] form fruit buds at the base of one year old lateral branches, so you need to cut the new growth right back to retain the original shape of the bush. This will encourage a healthy crop for the following year. The bush will also have thrown up a forest of thin, spindly stems from the centre and these will need to be cut out.

Blackcurrants, [*Ribes nigrum*], on the other hand, produce fruit on new growth, so the traditional advice is to remove all the fruiting branches. I have to differ on this because, in my experience, new branches haven't put on as much growth as they do in the south of England, so you do end up with a smaller crop by following the traditional method. I find it much better to remove two thirds of the old stems and let new growth on the remainder top up the fruit for the following year. Again, shape and spacing between the branches will dictate what stays and what is removed.

Gooseberries, [*Ribes uva-crispa*], are treated like red and white currants. They fruit on one year old and older wood, and you control vigour by pruning back to a strong fruiting spur. If you want to keep your blood to yourself, you do need to prune quite severely, so the vicious thorns don't rip your skin too badly. I certainly reckon cordon training makes harvesting a lot less painful. In fact, Estienne and Liebault tell us in 'Maison Rustique' [1570] that gooseberries were used as hedges round their sixteenth century kitchen gardens, a fruitful alternative to hawthorn, I suppose.

It certainly is worth ensuring you have a good crop of all these fruits, with the possible exception of white currants which tend to be more seed than fruit. As well as jams and jellies, redcurrants play an important part in venison stews and roast pheasant, while gooseberry makes an invaluable addition to Christmas goose stuffing, contrasting well with the slightly fatty meat. First prize, however, in my book goes to the humble redcurrant, which is well worth a tussle with midges as it makes one of the best rosés in my cellar.